

Comments on the 2012 Housing Policy Update Public Hearings

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by Action in Montgomery

Housing Policy 2001

The Housing Policy report published by the Montgomery County Department of Housing and Community Affairs in July 2001 stated "the vision of Montgomery County is for all of its residents to have decent housing in sound neighborhoods." The report cited "affordable housing for all who live and in the county regardless of age or position." as part of this vision. It also envisioned "appropriate housing and services for each stage of life so that people can remain in the community as they grow older."

AIM'S Concern: Affordable Housing for Seniors

AIM continues to be concerned about affordable housing and the growing gap between the available affordable housing stock and the number of persons of all ages who need such housing. The list of Possible Housing Solutions for 2012 is a good list and includes many ideas that AIM has supported over the last 10 years. The first item on the list, "No net loss of regulated affordable housing units," harkens to a housing goal of AIM's in 2008. That year found County Executive Leggett committing to one-to-one replacement of affordable housing at an AIM Action of over 500 people. Yet we now believe this goal is not bold enough. Instead of one-to-one replacement, we need a plan to meet our county's actual housing needs.

AIM's current focus is on Senior Issues. AIM launched focus groups on Seniors Issues in our 30 member congregations and heard repeatedly that the County is not moving quickly enough to meet the new reality of our seniors population that is living longer while our economy and consequently the personal finances of many are declining. We are particularly concerned for the rapidly increasing senior population that now is nearly 18% of the County's 2010 population (60 + yrs).

AIM plans to submit more comprehensive comments in response to the DHCA Draft Housing Policy Update when it is made available in January. For now, we have an initial comment about the importance of accessory apartments to seniors.

Accessory Apartments: A Viable Tool

The 2001 report included providing accessory apartments as one of the "tools for enhancing housing choice" in the county. Now in preparation for the 2012 Housing Policy, the department has again identified the need to "develop guidelines, standards, and review procedures that reduce the cost and time associated with the review of special exceptions and accessory apartment applications" as one of the possible issues to be addressed in the new report.

AIM believes that making accessory apartments more readily available in the county serves a number of useful purposes, which would benefit seniors in particular.

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- ◆ Seniors who want to remain in their home but need personal assistance would have on-site space in which a caregiver could live.
- ◆ For seniors who did not need personal assistance, having another person on the premises could offer an important sense of security, particularly in emergencies.
- ◆ For seniors on fixed incomes, the rent from an accessory apartment could be a needed supplement to their income.

Montgomery County has been proactive in providing a wide range of services for seniors. Since 2007, several county agencies have worked in partnership with local community associations to establish "villages" where senior residents are better able to "age in place." This past fall, the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Service Center published a "blueprint" for establishing such villages, using as a model the experience of the Burning Tree Village located in the 450-household neighborhood by the same name in Bethesda.

A member of the board of directors of Burning Tree Village estimates that among the 450-member households, at least 10 are multi-generational. The board member did not have specific information on reasons why seniors are living with their offspring -- whether to care for grandchildren or to be cared for themselves. It can be assumed, however, that these seniors found it important, and perhaps necessary, to live in close proximity to family members.

AIM believes the Housing Policy Update should state that the Dept of Housing and Community Affairs believes that accessory apartments are an effective and available tool for creating affordable housing as part of the overall Housing Policy of the County and that retaining this tool proposed in 2001 is now more than ever an effective approach.

Pursuing such a policy will benefit the county as the overall population continues to age and adds little or no financial cost to the county at a time when the County is 43,000 affordable housing units below the number of units needed. When fiscal constraints are impacting the implementation of all affordable housing, tools that can be used at no cost to the County should not be shelved. Neighborhood concerns can be addressed without sacrificing the larger issue of adequate affordable housing.